

# Morocco

16–27 February 2005

**Participants:**

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**Leader: Peter Lansdown**

**Cream-coloured Courser**

## INTRODUCTION

In this report, the numbers given after each species' name represent the total number of days on which the species was encountered during the tour and the maximum number of birds on a single day.

**Day 1:** The eleven participants met at London Heathrow and enjoyed a comfortable afternoon direct flight to Casablanca, where we were welcomed by our Moroccan driver. The sun was setting as we took our seats on the minibus for the drive to our hotel in Témara Plage.

**Day 2:** We made an early start, heading inland to the region of Zaër. En route, as it began to get light, we saw our first Cattle Egrets (10, 400) and White Storks (8, 300). When we reached our destination, birds came thick and fast: immediately, three handsome Black-shouldered Kites (4, 4) were spotted, closely followed by a noisy party of Common Bulbuls (10, 30). Sardinian Warblers (8, 25) and Serins (9, 50) were everywhere, while the vivid colours of several African Blue Tits (6, 12) caught the eye. A leisurely walk produced a few Thekla Larks (8, 40) and Cirl Buntings (2, 5) but, disappointingly, just two Double-spurred Francolins (1, 2, H), both heard only at long range. In a quiet, scrubby valley and its adjacent farmland we found our first Southern Grey Shrike (10, 30), Black Kite (7, 150), Barbary Partridges (4, 4), Spotless Starlings (7, 40), Pallid Swifts (3, 20) and Crested Larks (10, 100), as well as a distant Long-legged Buzzard (7, 5). On our way to a peaceful lake, Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, we diverted through Morocco's bustling capital city, Rabat, where we admired the old city walls and a number of fine, historic buildings. At the southern end of the lake, 55 Greater Flamingos (2, 151) and six Black-winged Stilts (5, 50) were seen straight away and we were soon finding Crested Coots (2, 40) and unobtrusive Marbled Ducks (3, 30) among the many hundreds of birds, which were present. There were even more birds at the northern end of the lake, where careful searching revealed 14 Ferruginous Ducks (2, 14), six Red-crested Pochards (1, 6) and two smart adult Audouin's Gulls (3, 93). Our first Zitting Cisticolas (3, 10) and Eurasian Spoonbills (3, 40) were seen at further stops around the lake. We then drove north to the famous coastal lagoon of Merdja Zerga, where we positioned ourselves overlooking an extensive area of marshes and awaited dusk. It was in good light, however, that we saw four impressive Caspian Terns (3, 4), though the light was decidedly poor when we were finally rewarded by a distant sighting of two Marsh Owls (2, 2), a sighting that was thoroughly eclipsed the following morning by close views of one at roost. We spent the night at Moulay Bouselham.

**Day 3:** Firstly, we returned to Merdja Zerga where we were rewarded with outstanding views of a Marsh Owl at roost. An early Eurasian Turtle-dove (2, 2) and a splendid male Hen Harrier (2, 1) enlivened a long south-easterly journey across a flat agricultural landscape. The drive was broken by a short riverside walk at Oued Sebou, which enabled us to watch four Plain Martins (2, 4) at close range while 20 Little Swifts (6, 20) careered overhead. As we reached the foothills of the Middle Atlas the scenery changed and we found ourselves travelling through forests and across heaths and stony terrain. On the approach to Ifrane, we paused to enjoy the sight of 14 Lesser Kestrels (1, 17) hunting close to the road. Shortly after, we passed a lake and stopped at some woods. An obliging Hawfinch (1, 1) sat at the top of a tall tree while two Short-toed Treecreepers (1, 2) seemed to prefer to be close to, and occasionally actually on, the ground. During a short stroll, we located a pair of Levaillant's Woodpeckers (2, 2), which posed for us for so long that eventually we had to leave them and move on. We continued to climb over the rugged Middle Atlas and saw our first Blue Rock-thrush (7, 8) and Black Wheatear (6, 15) near the dramatic Fom Kheneg Gorge. Our final stop was to count the 93 Ruddy Shelducks (1, 93) on a wet meadow near Aguelmame de Sidi Ali, soon after which we descended to spend the night in the high plains town of Midelt.

**Day 4:** The day began with our first Hoopoe (6, 4) right outside the hotel. We drove to Zeida Plain, where we immediately saw about 100 Lesser Short-toed Larks (2, 100). It was a long time before the group as a whole saw any other species, but then it all happened quickly: four Temminck's Horned Larks (3, 12) were found, then a pair of Red-rumped Wheatears (2, 15) was located and finally three uncharacteristically showy Dupont's Larks (1, 4) gave themselves up to us all, which hopefully put to shame the individual glimpsed earlier by one of the group but never seen again. We crossed the eastern end of the High Atlas with a brief stop at Rich, where we bumped into our first House Bunting (8, 15), and another, longer stop at the Legionnaire's Tunnel, where we saw six Crag Martins (5, 100), seven Trumpeter Finches (3, 9) and a Desert Lark (3, 6). We left the mountains and drove south, enjoying the spectacular scenery along the Oued Ziz and the sight of several stunning White-crowned Black Wheatears (4, 31) en route. Two very productive stops were made in the desert near Erfoud, where we were to spend the night. These produced two Mourning Wheatears (1, 2), a Barbary Falcon (5, 2), a handsome male Desert Wheatear (4, 10) and a much appreciated Greater Hoopoe Lark (3, 5).

**Day 5:** We left the minibus behind and headed southeast in two Landrovers across the flat gravel margins of the Sahara. Unscheduled stops were made to admire the first of the day's Cream-coloured Coursers (2, 14), Bar-tailed Desert Larks (2, 10), Greater Short-toed Larks (2, 20) and Brown-necked Ravens (1, 29) before we reached the edge of the spectacular golden dunes of the Erg Chebbi. Here we saw five beautiful Desert Sparrows (1, 5), a distant Lanner (2, 3) on a high sand dune and, in a small area of trees and bushes, a Dartford Warbler (1, 1), a Eurasian Wryneck (2, 1) and a Tristram's Warbler (1, 1). Further south, in the oasis village of Merzouga, we watched six Laughing Doves (3, 15) and a sociable group of seven Fulvous Babblers (1, 7). The rest of the day was spent exploring the nearby dry lake bed and its adjacent sand dunes, where we encountered three Isabelline Wheatears (1, 3) and where three lucky members of the group had brief views of an elusive African Desert Warbler (1, 1). We returned to our hotel in Erfoud for the night.

**Day 6:** Reunited with our minibus, we headed west to the Gorges du Todra where, against a stunning backdrop, we located a fine Bonelli's Eagle (2, 2). We then continued our journey to the high stone desert known as the Tagdilt Track. We felt that our not inconsiderable efforts in this large, apparently featureless area were inadequately rewarded, though a party of six Black-bellied Sandgrouse (2, 32) was enjoyed by everyone. We retired to our hotel in nearby Boumalne du Dades.

**Day 7:** With our next hotel situated about 500 kilometres to the west, we knew that this would be mainly a day of travel. At about half way, we stopped for our first birding near Tizi-n-Taghatine in the Anti Atlas. Many birds were in the area including the first of the day's eight stunning Moussier's Redstarts (5, 12) and 50 Horned Larks (3, 50). Time was fast running out, however, when we achieved our main aim: finding Thick-billed Lark (1, 8). The party of eight birds, which included strongly-marked adults and rather plain juveniles, was surprisingly inconspicuous on the stony terrain. Further west, a short stop at the Aoulouz Gorge produced a smart Woodchat Shrike (2, 2) and a Black-crowned Night-heron (1, 1), while the only new species for the tour seen amongst the endemic argan trees of the Sous Valley was a Red-rumped Swallow (2,

1). The sun set on our sixth consecutive day of unbroken sunshine an hour or so before we reached our hotel in Agadir.

**Day 8:** The day began with a surprise: two Moroccan White Wagtails *M. a. subpersonata* (2, 3) by the hotel swimming pool! In unfamiliar cloudy conditions we headed northwest along the coast and stopped at a beach near Tarhazout. A short seawatch produced an Arctic Skua (1, 1), a Pomarine Skua (1, 1) complete with 'spoons' and three Great Skuas (1, 3). We continued to the Tamri area and quickly located 87 Northern Bald Ibises (1, 87) in the fields and we also recorded six Spectacled Warblers (1, 6) in the clifftop scrub. We returned to Agadir to visit the superb Oued Sous estuary, where 10 Eurasian Thick-knees (2, 10) and two Gull-billed Terns (1, 2) were seen before we began our walk down the estuary as the tide fell. Thousands of birds were present including six Slender-billed Gulls (1, 6), 30 Kentish Plovers (1, 30), a Wood Sandpiper (1, 1) and an Osprey (1, 1). We stayed near the estuary until dusk, when three Red-necked Nightjars (1, 3) became active; one bird habitually alighted on the track. We returned to our hotel in Agadir for the night.

**Day 9:** The whole day was spent to the south of Agadir along the Oued Massa. We started birding close to the village of Sidi Wassai, in an area alive with birds. Here we saw six new species for the tour, some of them present perhaps only because of the overcast conditions and a little rain: 15 Glossy Ibises (1, 25), four Bluethroats (1, 4) including a superb white-spotted male *L. s. cyanecula*, the first of the day's 18 Alpine Swifts (1, 18), six Common Quail (1, 6), five Subalpine Warblers (1, 6) and two Spanish Sparrows (3, 11). Nearer to the famous reserve itself were three Squacco Herons (1, 3) and our first Black-crowned Tchagra (1, 3), a stunning bird, which gave us wonderful views. We stayed in Agadir for a third night.

**Day 10:** In low cloud and patchy rain we travelled over the western end of the High Atlas to Marrakech where, despite more rain, we enjoyed the many sights, sounds and smells of the famous square. Next we headed southeast across the plain then climbed steeply, around numerous hairpin bends, up into the snow-covered High Atlas. Few birds were seen until we reached the ski resort of Oukaïmeden, where we immediately came upon a large flock of birds foraging in the snow. Snow was falling as we searched through the flock and found that many of the birds were Rock Sparrows (2, 110), but the level of excitement rose when two superb Crimson-winged Finches (1, 2) were discovered. We drove the short distance to our hotel, added a layer or two plus gloves, and ventured into the snowy landscape. We managed to see 28 Yellow-billed Choughs (2, 250) and five Rock Buntings (2, 5) before thick cloud severely limited visibility and put an end to the day's birding.

**Day 11:** To our surprise, it was a beautiful cloudless morning and we set off on foot crunching through the snow. Red-billed Choughs (1, 40) were seen very quickly, but it took a while to find a group of five rather unobtrusive Alpine Accentors (1, 5). We drove down to Marrakech then headed north for the long drive to Casablanca, a journey that was broken by a roadside stop for three Calandra Larks (1, 3). We spent our last night in Morocco in Casablanca.

**Day 12:** This was purely a travelling day, starting with a trip to the airport, where we said farewell to our driver, and continuing with our flight to London Heathrow, where there were more farewells and the tour ended.

## **ADDITIONAL SPECIES**

Species seen during the tour but not mentioned above were Little Grebe (4, 70), Great Crested Grebe (2, 6), Black-necked Grebe (2, 18), Northern Gannet (2, 40), Great Cormorant (4, 120), Grey Heron (5, 40), Little Egret (7, 10), Common Shelduck (1, 2), Eurasian Wigeon (2, 4), Gadwall (3, 40), Eurasian Teal (3, 30), Mallard (4, 30), Northern Pintail (3, 30), Garganey (2, 5), Northern Shoveler (2, 500), Common Pochard (3, 300), Tufted Duck (2, 4), Western Marsh-harrier (5, 25), Eurasian Sparrowhawk (7, 3), Common Kestrel (11, 30), Peregrine (3, 2), Water Rail (2, 1), Common Moorhen (4, 5), Eurasian Coot (4, 300), Eurasian Oystercatcher (1, 10), Pied Avocet (1, 2), Northern Lapwing (2, 20), European Golden Plover (2, 30), Grey Plover (2, 25), Common Ringed Plover (2, 100), Little Ringed Plover (2, 4), Common Snipe (4, 6), Black-tailed Godwit (2, 25), Bar-tailed Godwit (1, 12), Eurasian Curlew (4, 6), Common Redshank (3, 50), Common Greenshank (3, 4), Green Sandpiper (5, 3), Common Sandpiper (4, 2), Red Knot (1, 8), Sanderling (1, 50), Little Stint (1, 3), Dunlin (2, 30), Ruff (1, 2), Lesser Black-backed Gull (6, 3000), Yellow-legged Gull (4, 50), Black-headed gull (3, 200), Mediterranean Gull (1, 5), Little Gull (1, 1), Sandwich Tern (3, 60), Rock Dove (11, 200), Stock Dove (2, 25), Woodpigeon (7, 100), Eurasian Collared-dove (11, 200), Little Owl (2, 2), Short-eared Owl (1, 1), Common Swift (4, 10), Common Kingfisher (4, 3), Great Spotted Woodpecker (3, 5), Woodlark (1, 5), Skylark (2, 5), Sand Martin (2, 3), Eurasian Swallow (10, 200), House Martin (9, 20), White Wagtail (*M. a. alba* 11, 30), Yellow Wagtail (2, 100), Grey Wagtail (5, 4), Meadow Pipit (5, 20), Water Pipit (4, 5), Eurasian Wren (1, 2), Blackbird (10, 20), Song Thrush (5, 100), Mistle Thrush (3, 12), Cetti's Warbler (6, 5), Sedge Warbler (1, 20), Reed Warbler (1, 4), Common Chiffchaff (9, 50), Blackcap (7, 50), Common Whitethroat (1, 1), European Robin (4, 20), Black Redstart (10, 15), European Stonechat (10, 30), Coal Tit (2, 3), Great Tit (6, 6), Eurasian Jay (1, 2), Eurasian Magpie (5, 15), Western Jackdaw (1, 2), Common Raven (8, 40), Eurasian Starling (6, 200), House Sparrow (11, 300), Common Chaffinch (*coelebs* 2, 30; *africana* 5, 80), Common Crossbill (1, 2), European Greenfinch (6, 50), Eurasian Siskin (2, 2), Goldfinch (9, 250), Eurasian Linnet (6, 100) and Corn Bunting (6, 150).

The total number of species encountered in Morocco was a record 198 (197 seen and 1 heard only).